Using Technology to Create Student Space, Provide Resources, and Strengthen Governance in Graduate Programs

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Because graduate work can be socially isolating (Lovitts, 2001) and many graduate students find themselves in unfamiliar terrain upon transition from employment or college (Di Pierro, 2007), academic and social integration into the graduate community is integral to graduate student satisfaction and success. Community membership can be promoted in numerous ways and does not necessarily have to be promulgated by the faculty or administration. This paper examines how technology, specifically informative Web sites with interactive membership pages, can be used to inform and engage graduate students. In particular, this paper describes how graduate students in the Higher Education graduate program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) have used technology to strengthen their governance organization, build community, and provide each other with helpful resources. While no two graduate programs are the same, providing adequate information and building community membership seem to be common challenges (Brandes, 2006; Di Pierro, 2006; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Therrentine, 2006). In addition, the technological resources discussed below are likely to be similar from campus to campus. Thus, this paper aims to serve as a guide for students in other graduate programs to create the virtual space necessary to build community and encourage membership.

Program Description

The Higher Education program at UMass is practitioner based, offering M.Ed. and Ed.D. degrees, and admits professionals who attend on a part-time basis and full-time students who hold graduate assistanships in student and academic affairs offices around campus. Many students routinely attend and occasionally present at student affairs conferences (e.g., NASPA and ACPA), and most aim for administrative positions in student and academic affairs upon graduation. At the same time, the program has a strong research focus and is academically rigorous, the faculty are engaged with research associations and conferences (e.g., ASHE and AERA), and there are numerous students who aim to be scholars and professors of higher education. While this heterogeneity is a positive aspect of the program—it makes for lively debates in the classroom—the diversity of lifestyles, interests, and goals effectuates two major

challenges: 1) ensuring all students are equipped with necessary information about the program, requirements, and opportunities, and 2) establishing community outside of the classroom.

Using technology could be an effective means of surmounting these obstacles, but the systems put in place must be intentionally designed. Currently, the Higher Education program has a Webpage housed within the newly updated School of Education Web site. Although this page provides information about the requirements for degree completion, a list of sample courses, and profiles of the faculty (see http://www.umass.edu/education/academics/epra/), the Higher Education Webpage, indeed the entire School of Education Web site, is more informative for prospective, not current, students. Required forms (including forms to add or drop classes, assistantship paperwork, coursework plans, and graduation eligibility forms) are not available online; there is no information about conferences, academic journals, assistantships, or practicum opportunities; nor is there any designated virtual space for students to interact with faculty or other students. Thus, in order to locate important documents, learn about scholarship opportunities, and connect with other community members, current students must make a concerted effort. Certainly, graduate students should be responsible for involving themselves in and learning about their programs, but doing so would be far easier and more successful with designated systems designed to ensure engagement.

In an effort to create such systems, several graduate students in the Higher Education program have taken proactive measures. The first step was holding an organizing meeting to discuss creating a student governance association for the Higher Education program to facilitate the academic, social, and professional well being of graduate students, and maintain a collaborative, collegial graduate student community. The next step was to generate a Web site for the Higher Education Graduate Student Association (HEGSA) that could provide information and act as a virtual gathering space. Designing the Web site and making it live as quickly as possible was particularly important because this virtual space would allow for ongoing conversations that are open to all students, and would not restrict participation in the governance group to those who are available to meet on campus at a specific time. Although in the beginning stages of development, students already find the HEGA Web site informative and helpful in connecting them to the Higher Education program. To provide more detail of the design process and content of the Web site, the following sections outline the Site development step-by-step.

Creating the Web site

UMass provides user-friendly templates and offers space for each student to host a Web site, which made the process of creating the HEGSA Web site fairly easy. HEGSA coordinators chose an interactive blog template because one of the highest priorities in this project was creating common space that would be useful and engaging to all students in the program. The blog format allows users to post ideas, add specific content, and engage in a variety of discussions without needing technical training or coordination. Further, anyone with an institutional E-mail account can be assigned as a Site administrator and as such create and edit the blog, which is essential to ensuring the longevity of the Site since each new cohort of students can easily be given control of it.

The first step to creating a blog is to sign into the blog service Web site using an institutional E-mail and password (see Figure 1). Since each blog is connected to a specific student's account,

HEGSA requested a university E-mail address that would enable the Site to be hosted by HEGSA and not that of one particular student. While this request was being processed, the Site began construction using a student's account, but once processed, the content of the Site was exported to the new address. After logging in, users are taken to the blog creation and management homepage (see Figure 2) at which users can name the blog, write posts, manage content, edit the presentation of the blog, add special features or "widgets," be connected to the blog creation help page, and do most other structural work regarding the Site.
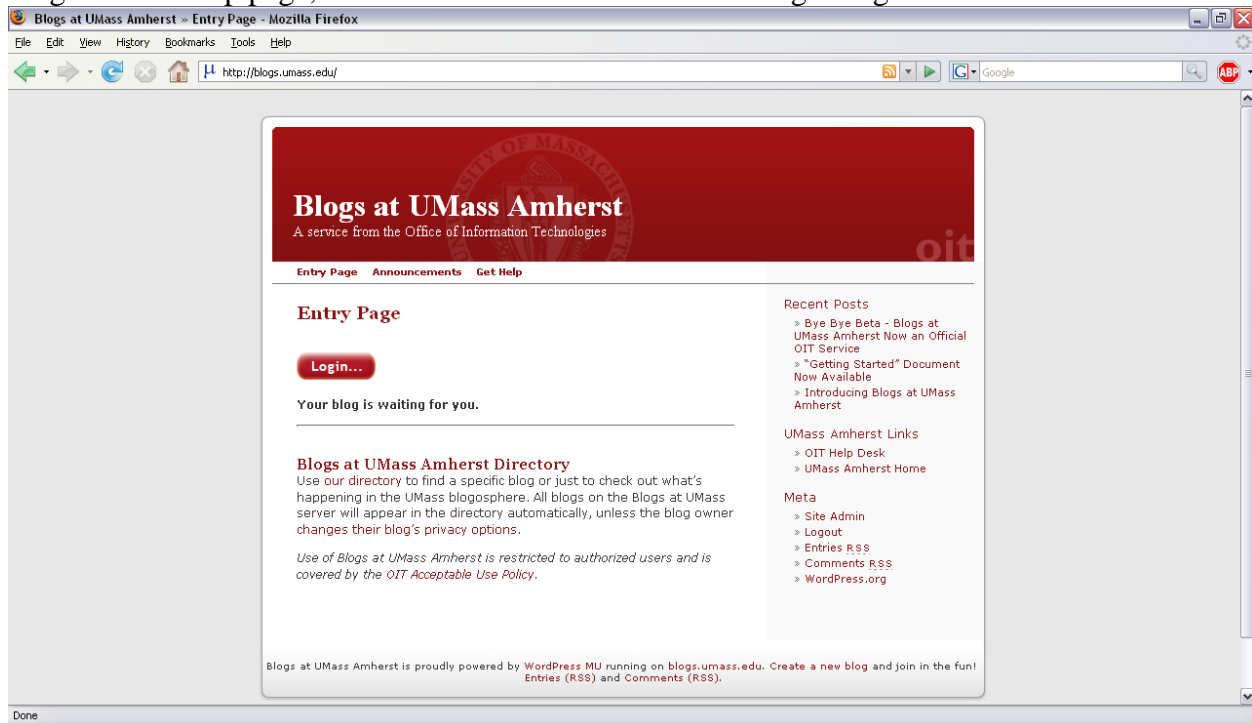
Figure 1: Blog login page http://blogs.umass.edu/

The second step is to choose a template for the Site (see Figure 3). Using a template eliminates most of the traditional design work from the project, making the creation much easier and allowing the creators of the Site to focus on content.
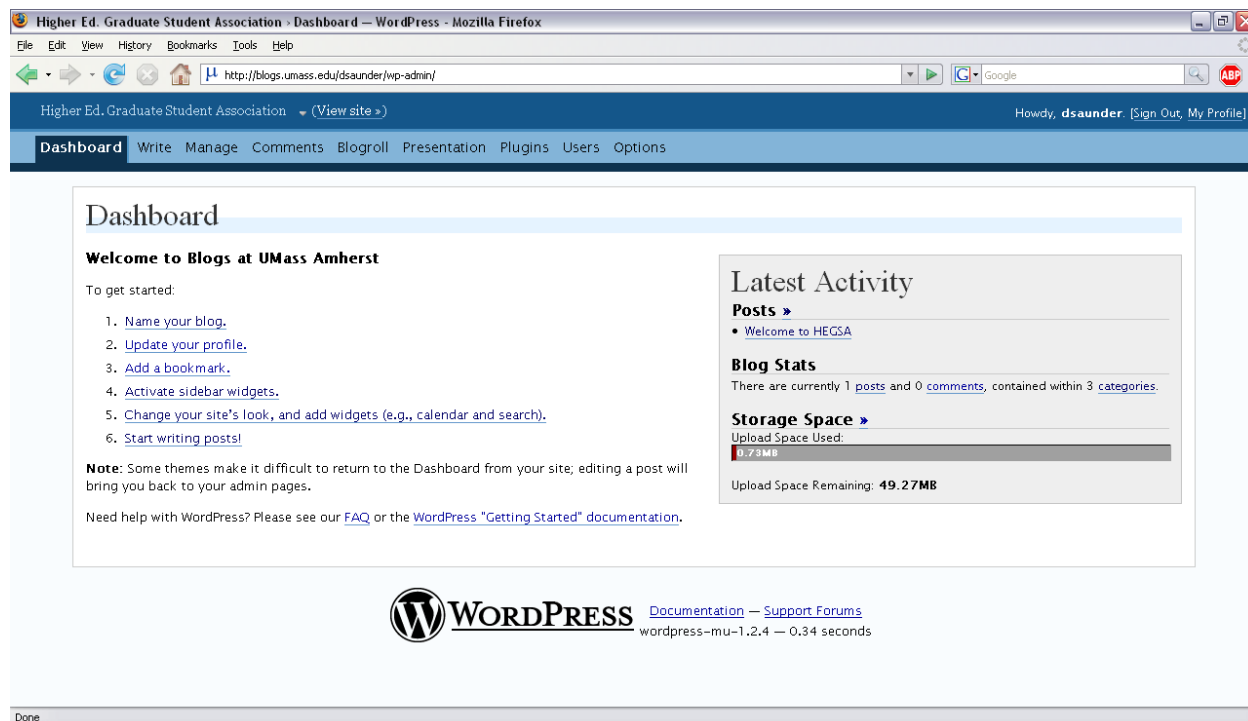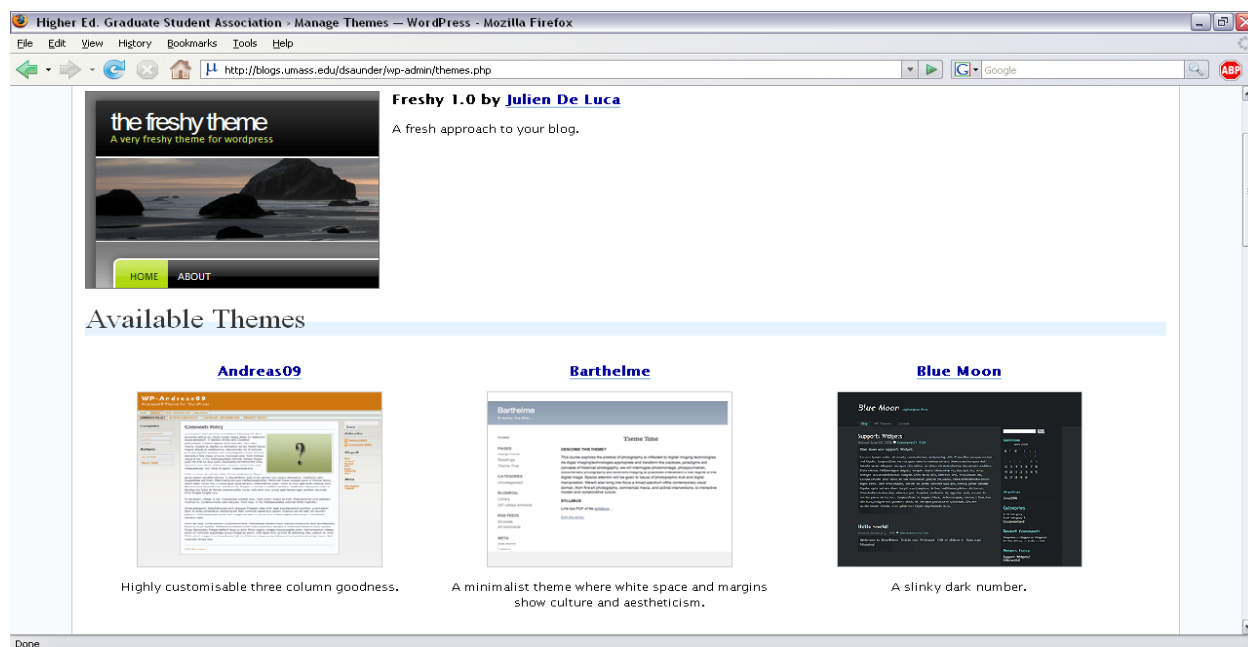
Figure 2. Blog Homepage

Figure 3. A selection of possible templates

Once the template is chosen, content can be added to the Site. HEGSA chose to create different pages for each content area since there were a number of distinct content areas, including information about HEGSA, student bios, program resources, professional organization and conference information, academic resources including links to relevant journals and databases,

and space to host student papers. These pages have individual tabs located on the header of each page, allowing for easy navigation of the Site. The homepage is reserved for news and general student comments, and students are able to post comments and have discussions on most pages. Creating a new page requires choosing the "write" option (see Figure 2) at the top of the blog creation homepage (called "Dashboard"), then adding the page title in "page title" box and the content desired for that particular page (see Figure 4).
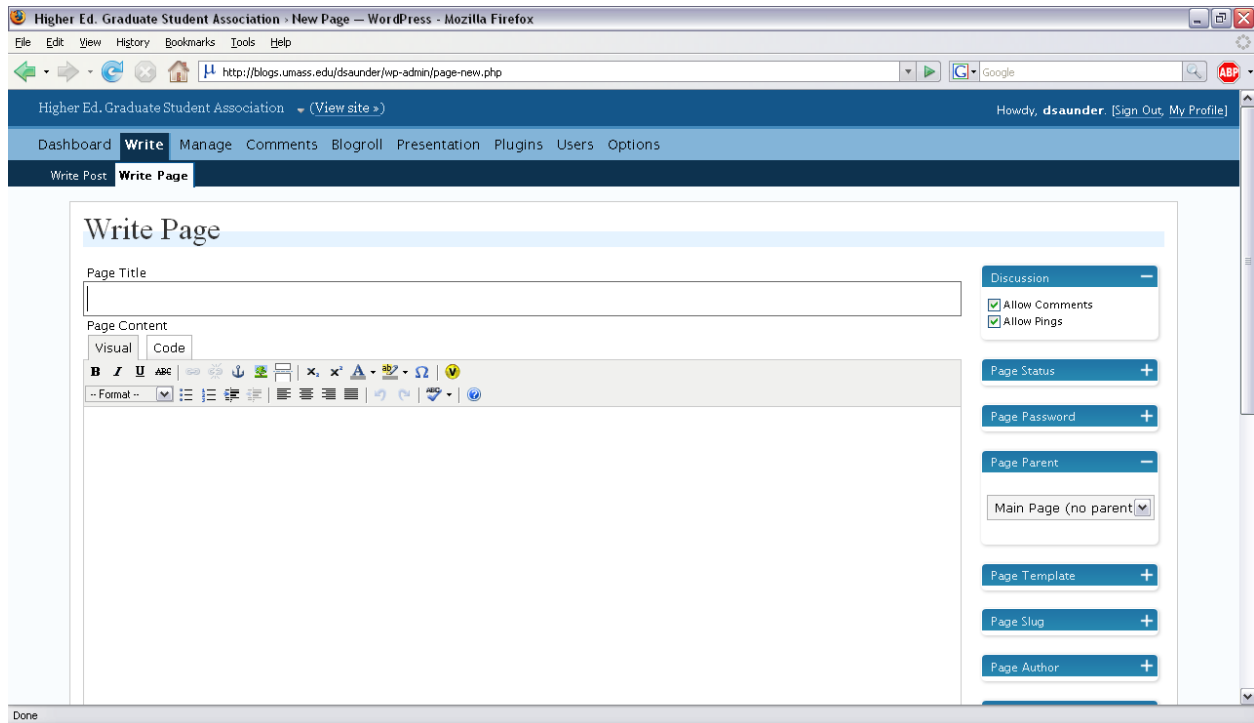

Figure 4. Write page tab to create a new tab on the blog homepage.

Figure 5 depicts a page created in this fashion both in its raw form as described above and its final form once it is saved and published on the Web site.
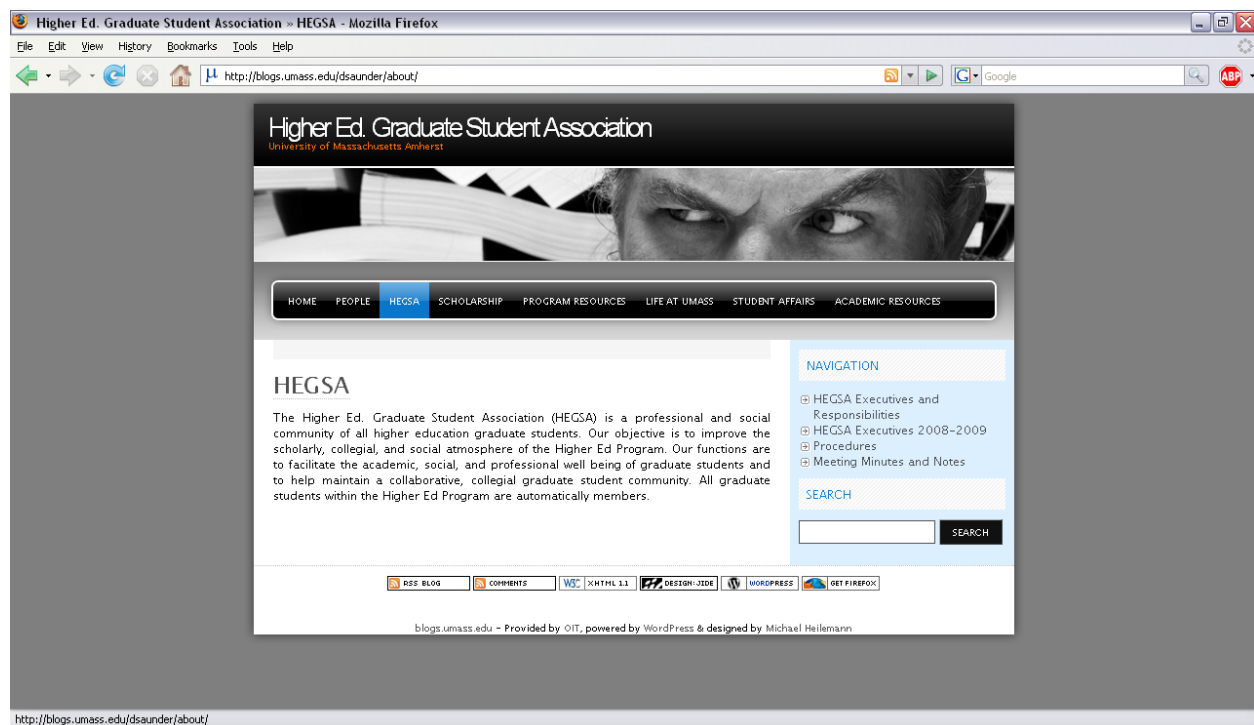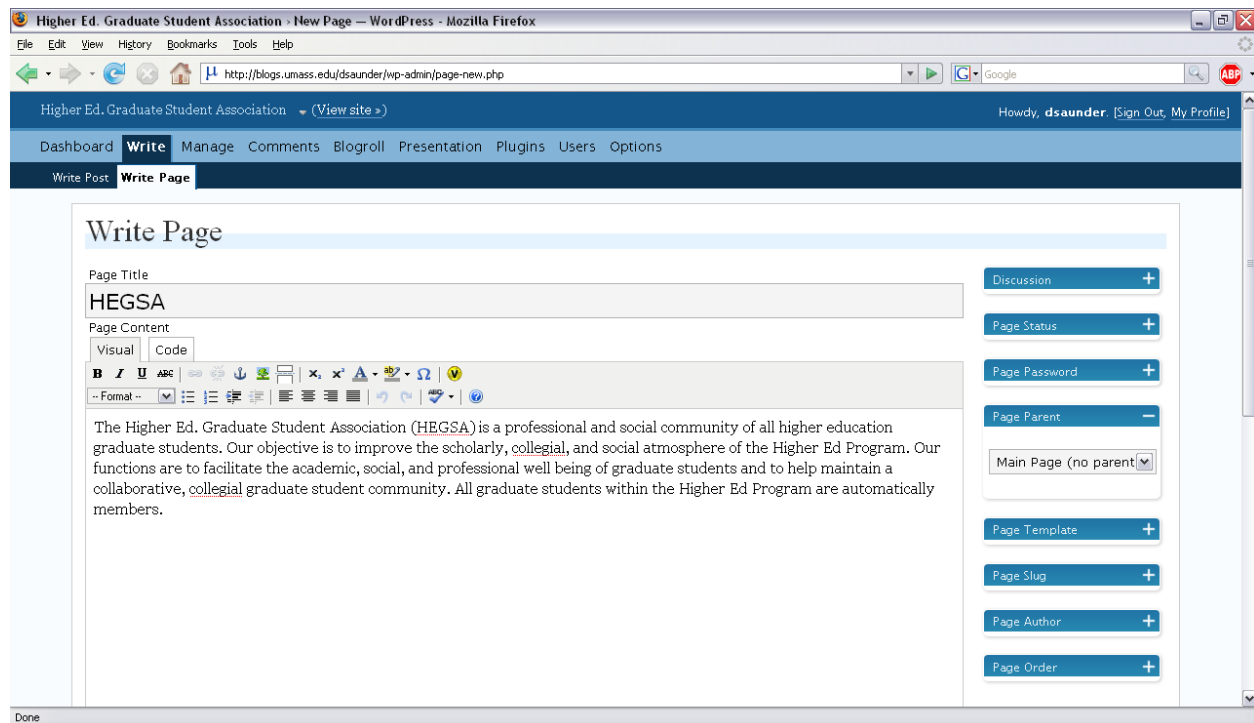
Figure 5. Example of Blog page. The top image is in the writing option, the bottom is the actual page on the Site once it was created.

Of particular note is the "page parent" option on the right portion of the write page screen (see Figure 6; The page parent option is the forth option on the right bar and is indicated here by the –

sign). This option allows users to sublink any added pages to a main page, which is an enormous help in organizing the Site and providing detailed information. For example, we wanted the HEGSA information page to include general information about the organization, its bylaws, its leadership positions and related responsibilities, and contact information for the current leadership. To do so, we created one main HEGSA page with general information and then subpages using the page parent option to organize the remaining information. Figure 6 shows this process for creating the HEGSA Executives and Responsibilities subpage. Once this was created, the HEGSA page could include links to the subpages on the right portion of the screen (see Figure 7). (Note: The location of the subpage links will depend on the template being used).
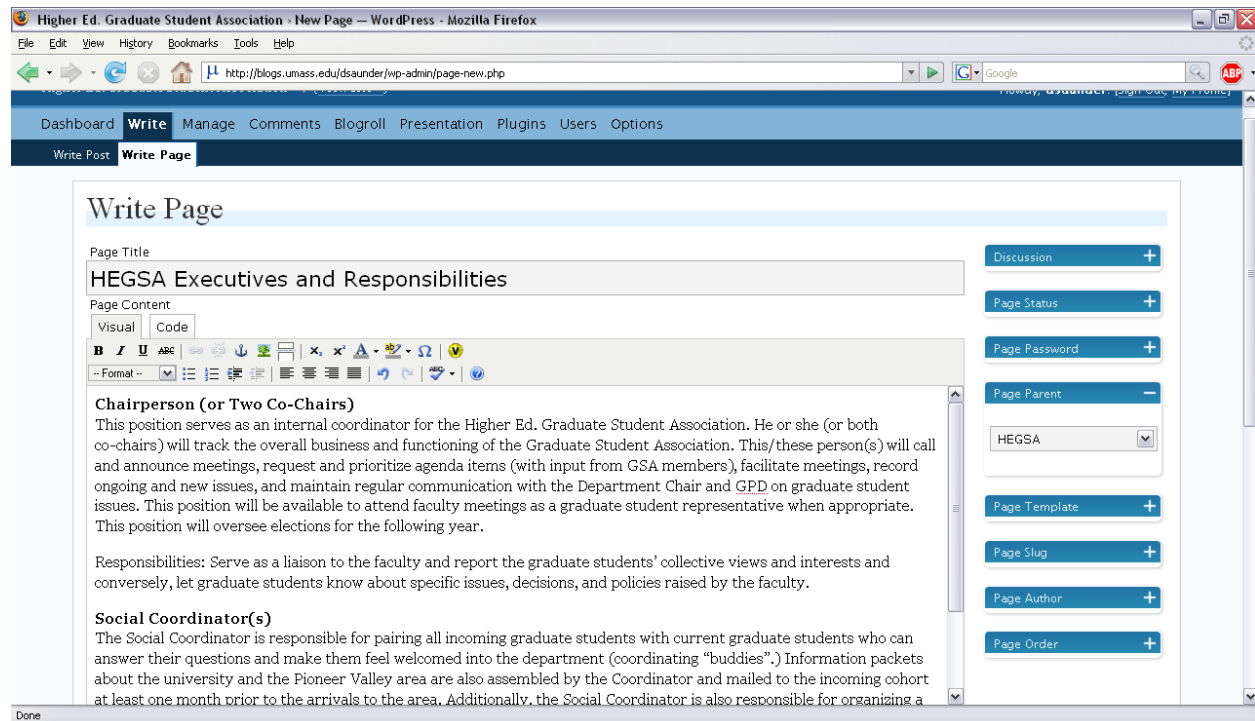

Figure 6. Subpage for HEGSA Executives and Responsibilities. Notice under "page parent" on the right is the "HEGSA" page already created.

Once the main and subpages are created, they can be edited easily, including the content, location on the Site, and the connection or lack thereof to a page parent, by using the "Manage" tab on the blog creation homepage (see Figure 8).

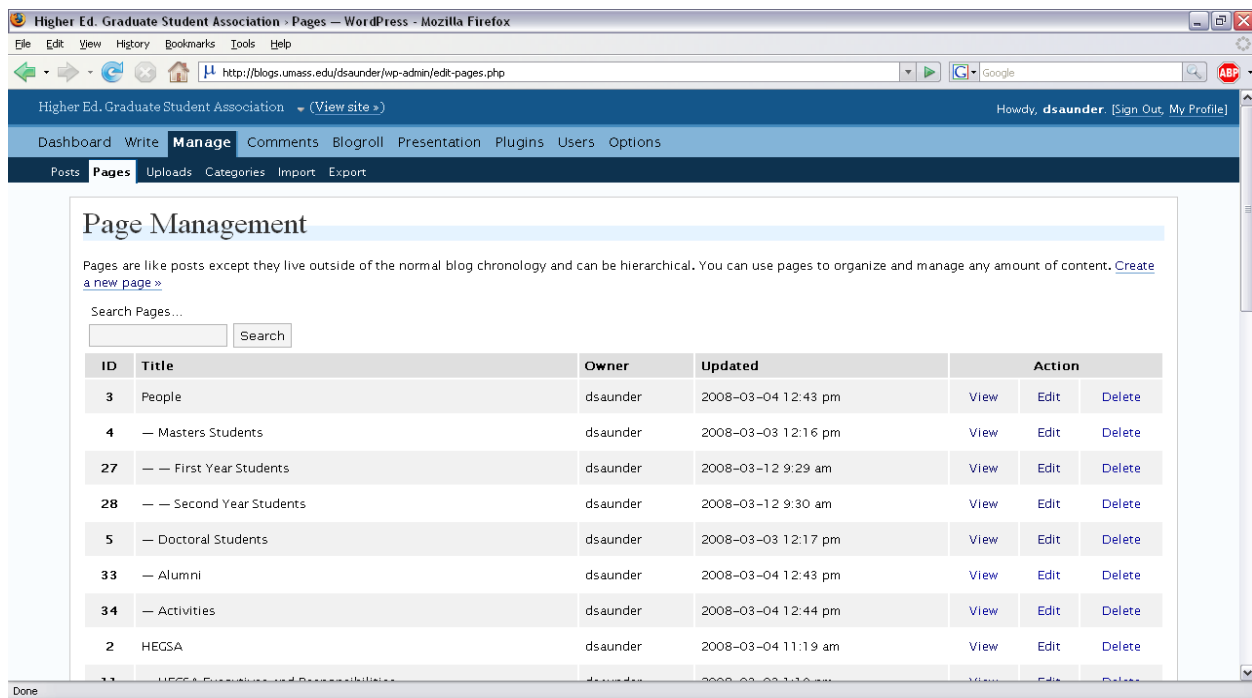Figure 7. A main page with several subpages (located on right).

Figure 8. Managing the blog.

Some of the added pages on the HEGSA Site required uploading Word and PDF documents (such as program guidelines, course syllabi, and program forms). To add a document, users can do the following: Select the "manage" tab and then the page on which the document is linked; scroll to the bottom of the page, click the "browse" button, locate the file to be uploaded (which is easiest to do if the document is saved on the user's computer or network), and click the

"upload" button below on the bottom of the page (see Figure 9); highlight the text on the page to be linked to the uploaded document, chose the "link to file" option, and click the "send to editor button" (see Figure 10). After returning to the page users should now be able to click the hyperlinked text and the document should open.
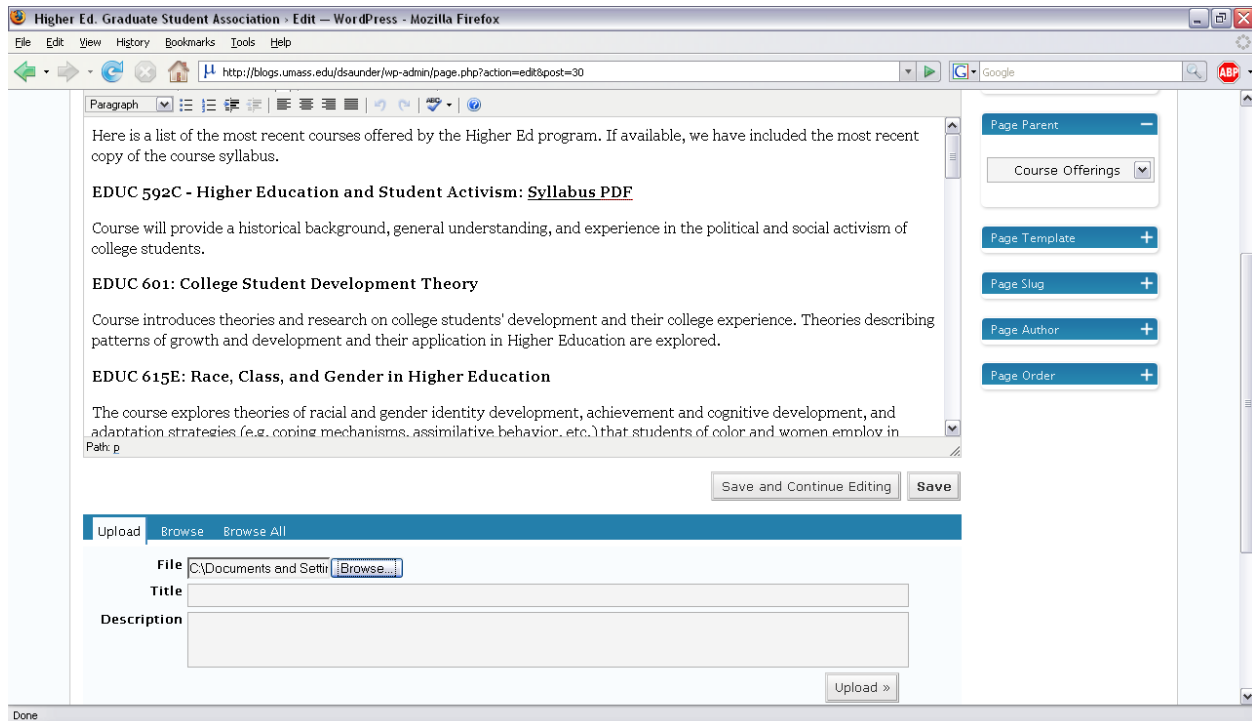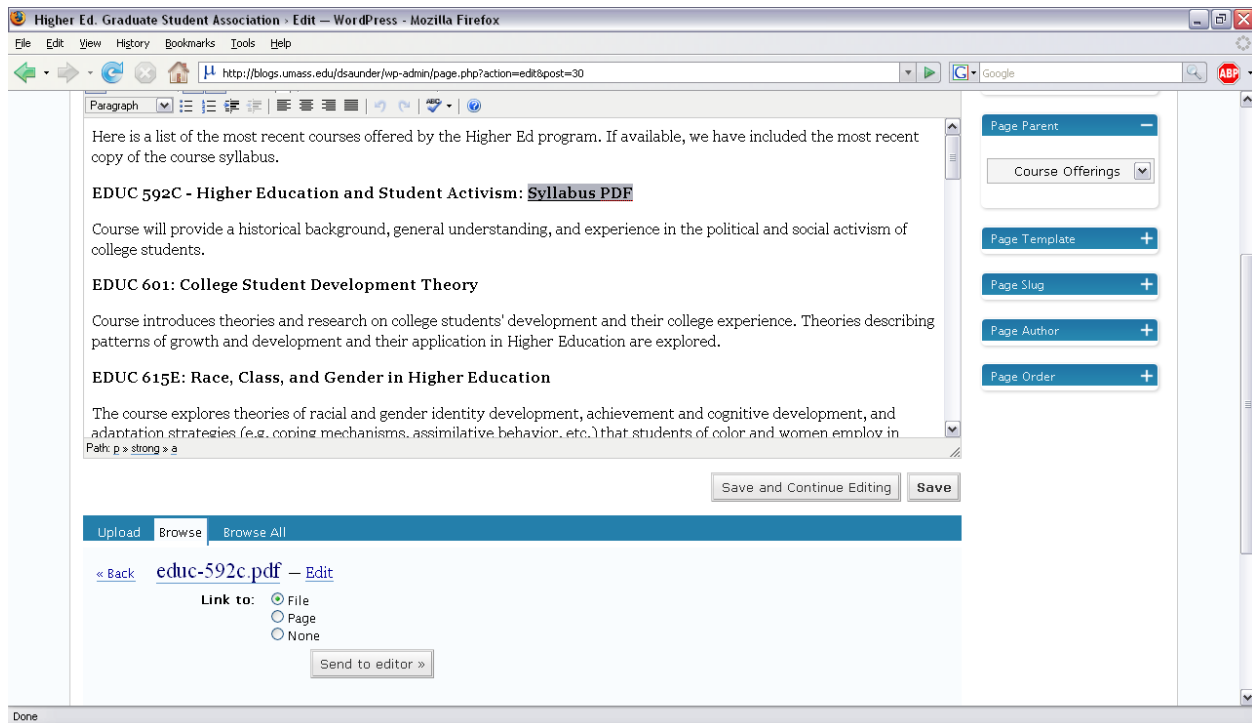
Figure 9. Uploading a file.

Figure 10. Linking an uploaded file to the text of a page.

Site Content

Fortunately, HEGSA did not encounter space constraints since UMass provides 300GB of space for each student's Web site. As such, we were able to post all of the planned content, including a page for pictures and bios of all current students and alumni so we can learn a little about each other and put faces to the names of people in the program; a HESA page including the mission, structure, and activities of the governance body to help familiarize students to HEGSA; and a page to showcase our academic work, including conference presentations and publications, to provide tangible examples of quality work produced by students in the program and demystify the presentation and publication process. In addition, we created a page dedicated to the program information students had difficulty acquiring otherwise. This included a link to all of the current Higher Education courses offered through the School of Education, descriptions and recent syllabi of courses offered by the Higher Ed faculty, forms required by the program, and advising guidelines for masters and doctoral programs. Following the program resources page, we created a page that offered information about the Amherst area, including links to housing options, transportation information, and local restaurant menus and other town information. The next page provided links to student affairs professional associations and conferences, as well as links and information concerning student affairs in general. The final page provided similar information for the "academic" professional associations, as well as links to useful research databases.

Conclusion

Together, these pages create a critical space through which students can become more fully integrated within the program and the profession while strengthening relationships with their fellow students. While there is no "quick fix" for the socialization and integration challenges facing graduate students, the use of interactive Web sites and blogs provides additional resources for students. While certainly the onus is on the students to take responsibility for their own education, for this to occur there must be a supportive, accessible, and welcoming structure in which students can situate themselves. We hope that this Web site will enhance the current structure and enable students to become more actively engaged with the Higher Education program and the profession as a whole.

References

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